



# A LIVED EXPERIENCE IN BEFRIENDING EMOTION, DEEP LISTENING AND MINDFUL SPEECH: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Research confirms that meditation is a widely used and an increasingly popular intervention that positively affects the individual at cognitive, physical, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual level. And have also proved that through meditation, integration of the mind and body is cultivated and desirable mental qualities such as affability, compassion and equanimity are nurtured. In the form of personal narrative journal entries, this article presents how the regular practices of sitting meditation cultivated mindfulness activities like self-awareness, befriending ones emotion, deep listening, mindful speech and action in the first author's daily activities including the classroom teaching and learning environment.

The setting of this autoethnographic study is Samtse College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan, where the first author is one of the teaching faculty.

**KEY WORDS:** Self-awareness, befriending emotions, deep listening, mindful speech.

## Introduction

Teaching is considered a noble profession in Bhutan, and teachers are still looked upon with reverence and respect. But at the same time, there are lots of expectations on Bhutanese teachers in terms of professional as well as personal contributions to the society. And atop that, globally, today, the teaching profession has so many responsibilities that are assigned or self-imposed that many of us just thrust from one lesson to another with few or no opportunities for contemplation or reflection. As a teacher educator, in an array of circumstances and for diverse reasons, I always felt the urgent need to contemplate and reflect. I believe that a few minutes of contemplation and reflection would enhance the teacher's ability to be mindful of his or her daily actions, be it in the classroom or outside. So in my own little ways, I used to make time to contemplate for minutes or two on my daily activities. And this humble practice of mine deepened and became profound when I got the opportunity to pursue a degree in Contemplative Education at Naropa University, Colorado, USA, in 2012.

The Contemplative education program introduced me to the sitting meditation and mindfulness practices that bring about positive transformation in one's personal as well as professional lives. The program demanded few minutes' regular practice of sitting meditation and observation of the experiences in the form of personal journal entries. Since then, I had been continuing the practice of sitting meditation and observing my experiences. Thus, through personal narrative journals, this article presents some of the mindfulness practices that were evident in my personal as well as in my professional activities as a result of regular practice of few minutes of sitting meditation.

## Method

The method I used to capture the impact of mindfulness practices in my daily activities, including my classroom teaching and learning is the daily practice of sitting meditation and Journaling. The ensuing sections detail them.

### • Meditation

Sitting meditation is like a golden key that helps us to know ourselves and confirms the important role mind play in our physical lives (Choden, P, 2012). There are different ways people practice meditation. The one I use is the sitting meditation with its mindful focus on 'breathing' the practice is to acknowledge the thoughts when arises and again return to the focusing on the breath again. I practiced this approach of meditation on a regular basis twice daily (30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes at night) in the confinement of my shrine room. Besides this regular sitting, I would pause for short meditation during the day whenever I got the opportunity- be it in the car, meetings, workshops or seminars.

### • Journaling

Journaling was used as the key component to document the impact of meditation in my daily activities including the classroom teaching and learning. I always maintained a small note pad to record the sudden moment to moment awareness of feelings, emotions and actions of my daily activities. I wrote my journal entry on the daily basis and always tried to make each entry of my journal at one sitting as it helped me capture my explicit experience of the moment. However, when I didn't have enough time at hand, I made short anecdotal notes of the experiences and later at leisure expanded on it.

## The findings: My profound story...

I discuss the profound journey of my meditation impact with special focus on the cultivation of befriending emotion, deep listening and mindful speech. The discussion for each of this practice is done in relation with relevant and appropriate literature as this article does not have a separate section on literature review.

### • Befriending emotions

Welwood (2012) in the article 'Befriending emotions' states that emotions are our most common experience of being moved by forces seemingly beyond our control. As such, they are among the most confusing and frightening phenomena of everyday life. "People often treat them as a nuisance or a threat, yet failing to experience them straightforwardly undermines sanity and well-being. Can we ever befriend our emotions and accept them as part of us?" (Welwood, p.2) He further states that the practice of meditation can provide this access, partly through helping us to face and work with our emotions more directly. Similarly, meditation is learning how to go within yourself, to make your mind calm and clear, free from agitation, desire and confusion (Kovida, B. p.9). It is an important form of self-control and healthy practice. I resonate with the above statements and feel that meditation does help us to befriend ones emotional turbulence. Here is an example of how I have befriended my emotion:

*Just this morning, I was very upset with one of my colleague for not returning the LCD projector to my class after his use, as I had some slides to share with the class. I was literally flaring up, but in the midst of this emotion, I asked myself 'do I need to really flare up like this? Can't I just conduct my class without the use of the slides?' (Personal journal entry, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013)*

Wright (2009) says that Meditation opens a space of receptivity within our attuned mind to what is going on around us at the very moment. It augments focus and attention and could be used to enhance empathy in all intentional capacities. In the same token, Brown (2011) notes that meditative ability to notice when our attention has strayed and to gracefully and readily come back to the matters of the present moment is very useful while teaching.

In the past when I am in the classroom, I used to get carried away by what I am doing especially when I am lecturing a new concept and go on and on without being aware of my present moment. However, since my introduction to this quality of awareness and inner meaning through the practice of meditation, I now suddenly become aware of what and how I am doing in the midst of my teaching. Here is an excerpt from my journal:

*In my 'teaching strategy' module I was discussing the field work strategy with my second year students. I had my lecture notes on the slides and was talking about the three phases of fieldwork. I finished with the pre-field work phase and was on the actual field work phase when I suddenly realized that I was rushing through the slides without inviting any participation from the students. I paused a bit, looked at my students and asked "any questions or clarification on the content we covered so far?" There was a long silence, which indicated no questions or clarification from them, and then a girl raised her hand. I said "Yes, Dechen, any question?" She got up and said, "No, question, madam. I would just like you to go little slowly when explaining the phases." I smiled at her, and said, "thank you, Dechen, I will keep that in mind. And from thereafter, I made sure that I don't rush through my explanation of any concept. (Personal Journal entry, May 22nd,*

2013)

Brown (2002) contends that faced with meeting the many needs and demands of ourselves and our students, finding time to nurture inner experience may seem like an impossible luxury. However, by meditating regularly outside of our teaching schedule, mindfulness of our inner life emerges and, over time, carries over into skillful and intuitive teaching. Meditation is a method of effectively integrating our inner experience into teaching. This is resonated by Burggraf & Grossenbacher (2007) that using meditation for a few minutes at the beginning of the class for students to sit in silence would result in "deeper and enhanced engagement with academic material, compassionate engagement with social issues, and greater open-mindedness and creativity" (p.3).

Further, Goldstein and Kornfield (1987) opine that the practice of meditation has to do with opening, balancing, exploring and investigating what is hidden in us. We practice to 'open, to balance, and explore' (p.15). In the same line, Wright (2009) states "The meditative cultivation of mindfulness opens us to see situation in a way that is attentive to the sensitivities and needs of everyone involved" (p.74). The following experience exemplifies openness to different situations and investigating what is hidden in us.

*This afternoon in my Multi-grade teaching class, my students in groups were preparing self-instructional materials for grades 6. I was visiting each group, going through their materials and making necessary comments and suggestions. When I was with one group, I could hear about two groups clapping and murmuring 'ahh...oh..wow!' Had it been in the past I would have immediately reprimanded them and asked them stop that noise without bothering to see what was making them do that. But this time I was more open to what I was experiencing and went to the groups to see what the excitement was about. I saw that it was the excitement and enthusiasm of having made what they thought was an exceptionally wonderful self-instructional material. I just signaled them a 'thumbs up' and with a broad satisfying smile moved to the next group. (Personal journal entry, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2014)*

#### • Deep Listening and Mindful speech

Hanh (2009/1997) define deep listening as the kind of listening that is generous, empathetic, supportive and trusting. A listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person, and one can call that compassionate listening. He further adds that deep listening helps us to recognize the existence of wrong perceptions in the other person and wrong perceptions in us. Deep listening is a listening that suspends self-oriented reactive thinking and open one's awareness to the unknown and unexpected. It is attentive rather than reactive thinking and involves listening from a deep receptive and caring place in oneself. Here is another example of how I tried to practice deep listening:

In my college before the start of the semester we have what we call the semester planning and review meetings for two days. In this meeting we review the past semester and then discuss the plans for the coming semester. Because of these, the meetings would drag on from 9am to about 5pm with only an hour or so lunch break. Sometimes there will be people talking just for the sake of talking and also arguing for the sake of arguing making no productive contribution to what is being discussed. Because of all these, these meetings can be very tiring but this time with my meditation practice, I saw difference in how participated in the meeting.

*Today, (the second day of my semester meeting) I arrived little earlier than the actual start time. I took my seat, settled properly and meditated for few minutes. Occasionally, even in the midst of the meeting I quietly meditated for a minute or two. I observed that it opened my mind to broader perspectives and do deep listening. It helped me to see and accept other people's perspectives as valid and valuable even when I may disagree with their perspective. And that approach made the sittings for this meeting much more relaxing and productive. (Personal journal entry, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2014)*

#### Méditation Impact : Conclusion

This article's findings are personal experiences recorded through personal journal entries, because of which sometimes it might appear quite informal. But it documents the cultivation of profound mindfulness gained through the practice of sitting meditation on a regular basis. The practice of sitting meditation on the regular basis brought wonderful transformation in my personal as well as professional life. It helped me to pay attention to my present moment experiences whether in the classroom or outside. It facilitated me to accept my thoughts, feelings and perceptions without being judgmental and see things for what they are. It also heightened my awareness of thoughts and emotions and developed dispositions like empathy and compassion, which is very important in teaching and learning.

As I conclude, I would like to say that in addition to the above mentioned transformations, the sitting meditation with its practice of precise noticing and then letting go is teaching me to soften my sense of ownership and the accompanying rigidity. It is teaching me to notice how my students respond to the classroom dynamics and tailor my pedagogy to meet their needs in the moment. Therefore, for all these reasons and much more, I aspire the interested readers of this article to venture into the profound world of mindfulness practice.

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